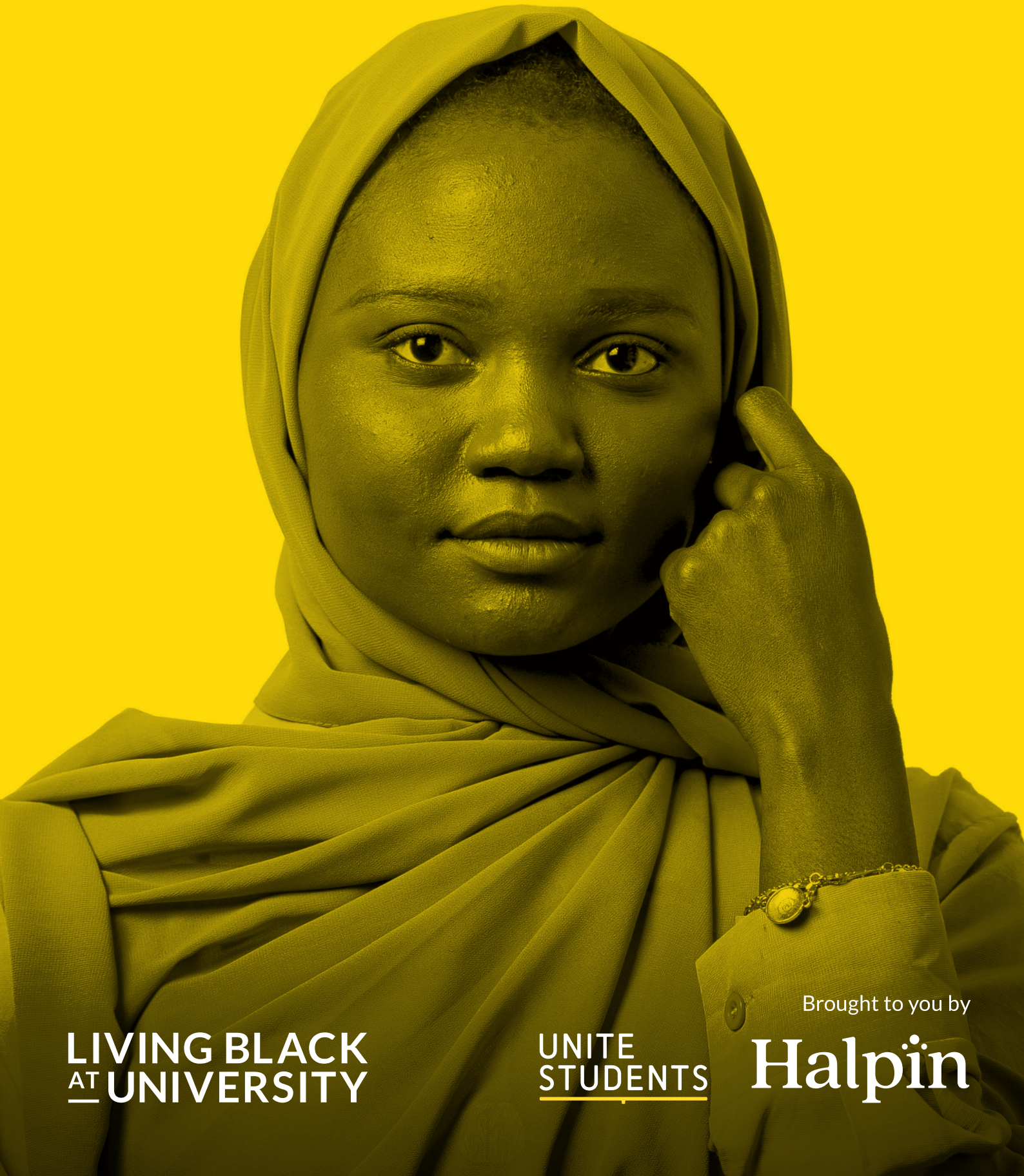# RESEARCH TOOLKIT

Using research to improve Black students' accommodation experience

LIVING BLACK AT UNIVERSITY

UNITE STUDENTS

Brought to you by

Halpin

Contents

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Introduction

The Living Black at University report was published in February 2022 by Unite Students and Halpin Partnership. It was the first research in the UK to focus on the experience of Black students in student accommodation, and its scope included both university halls and private Purpose-Built Student Accommodation (PBSA). The research revealed how much work was still to be done within the sector to meet the needs of Black students and to create an equal sense of belonging.

The Unite Students Commission on Living Black at University was launched in May 2022 to bring sector leaders and key sector bodies together to help implement the report's recommendations at a national level.

This toolkit is an output of the Commission. It enables universities and accommodation providers to replicate the original research with their own student body. Every institution's student body and every student accommodation community is slightly different. By running the research locally, universities and accommodation providers can pinpoint the specific issues that need to be addressed and take the best actions accordingly.

The toolkit is there to support this research. It includes the survey tool that was used in the original research and there is further advice from the research team on involving Black students in the research, conducting focus groups and acting on the results.

But this toolkit is not a blueprint. Each university or accommodation provider operates in a different context, and will already have Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and/or race equality work underway. There may be useful datasets that already exist, consultations underway and specialist staff whose expertise can be drawn on. There will almost certainly be EDI strategies, goals and targets, and in some cases Access and Participation Plans that mention Black students. All of these form the context that will shape the rationale for the research and the research questions.

For example, universities may wish to extend the research to Black students who have chosen not to live in student accommodation. While there is anecdotal evidence that some Black students actively choose not to live in student accommodation, there is no systematic evidence base yet.

We hope that this toolkit will be useful in planning and carrying out research with your own students. If you make use of this toolkit we would love to hear from you at **LBUresearch@unitestudents.com**

Involving Black students

An important first step in conducting research of this kind is to involve Black students from the outset. This builds trust – a key recommendation of the original research – and helps to ground both the findings and the recommendations in the lived experience of students themselves.

✓ **Build trust:** Make it clear what your intentions are with this work and the long-lasting strategic change you hope to achieve. Be clear that you are committed to being open and transparent about findings – no matter how negative it may be. Make sure students are clear that what they say would not be attributed to them – many students worry about taking part in research if comments can be traced back to them (this is usually where independent facilitators can help). Show that there is buy-in from university leadership, some students will not want to take part if they feel the research will not be going anywhere important.

✓ **Demonstrate awareness of key issues:** Make sure to have a general understanding of the issues Black students face in higher education, whether that's covert forms of racism like microaggressions or overt forms of racism like racist physical attacks. Be aware that Black is not a homogenous group, and that it is important to assess the intersections within to cater for the needs of each group in the optimal way.

✓ **Commit to building and maintaining relationships throughout the year:** Make an effort to go to where Black students already are whilst making an effort to be respectful of their safe spaces; go to networks, societies and campaign spaces. Don't just engage with Black students during Black History Month. Ensure interactions are meaningful and intentional, avoid transactional and performative engagements.

✓ **Give leadership opportunities:** For those Black students who want a more active part in the research, treat them as partners and critical friends. Keep in mind that not everyone will want to have that role so don't put pressure on them, some would just want to attend a focus group or do the survey. Work with your students' union to seek their advice and work together to get students involved.

✓ **Provide incentives:** You want Black students to give up their own time to help with this research. To show that you value their time, provide incentives to take part.

✓ **Ensure mental and wellbeing support is available:** Talking about racism is not easy and can be traumatic. Make sure you are clear about what support is available. Ensure that there is access to culturally competent services either in person or online.

✓ **Remove barriers to participation:** Ensure focus groups are done a variety of times in-person and/or online so students with different commitments can take part. Ensure that the survey is not too lengthy. If someone fills in the survey, ensure that they can sign up to the focus group straight after completion.

Information and consent

Before taking part in the research, students should be given the opportunity to give their informed consent, either on paper or online. The statement describing the research should include the following at minimum.

✓ **Purpose of the study:** Its scope and the definitions of any technical terms or acronyms (for example 'PBSA').

✓ **What will happen:** Description of the activity they are being invited to take part in and how long it will take. Clarify that there are no right or wrong answers but you are interested in their experiences.

✓ **Do I have to take part?** Make it clear that it's up to them to decide whether or not they take part, and that they can withdraw at any time they want.

✓ **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?** Depending on the scope of the research activity, clarify whether the subjects discussed are of a sensitive nature and/or likely to cause comfort or distress. If there is a risk that they will, provide information about where they can go for help and support.

✓ **What are the possible benefits of taking part?** Describe why this research is important and the benefits it will bring to the experiences of future students.

✓ **Will my information be kept confidential?** State how you will protect the identity of those who take part – this is especially important if your institution has a small number of Black students. State how you will store the data or notes, and when it will be destroyed.

✓ **What will happen to the results?** Clarify how the data will be used, for example as anonymised quotes in a report. List all the expected outputs that will use the data (for example papers in academic journals, blogs, conference presentations).

✓ **Who is funding the research?** State any external funders, or that it is funded by the institution. If relevant, name the faculty or directorate that is sponsoring the research.

✓ **Who is carrying out the research?** Name the team, faculty or external partner as relevant.

Survey

Below is a generalised version of the Living Black at University survey that may be used in its current form or adapted as needed. It has been further edited by the research team to include edits or questions that would have been useful in the original research.

ABOUT YOU

I agree to take part in the survey and I understand that my participation is voluntary. I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes of this research study. I consent to my information being anonymously stored for use in future research.

○ *Yes/No*

Which of these terms best describes your status:

○ *Full-time undergraduate student*
○ *Full-time post-graduate student*
○ *Part-time undergraduate student*
○ *Part-time post-graduate student*
○ *Other (please specify)*

○ *Prefer not to say*

If you are a Home/UK student, which nation is your permanent home residence in?

○ *England*
○ *Northern Ireland*
○ *Scotland*
○ *Wales*

Which best describes your status?

○ *Home/EU*
○ *International*
○ *Prefer not to say*

What is your ethnicity?

○ *White*
○ *British*
○ *Irish*
○ *Gypsy or Irish Traveller*
○ *Other*
○ *Asian or Asian British*
○ *Indian*
○ *Pakistani*
○ *Bangladeshi*
○ *Chinese*
○ *Any other Asian background*
○ *Mixed or multiple ethnic groups*
○ *White and Black Caribbean*
○ *White and Black African*
○ *White and Asian*
○ *Any other mixed or multiple background*
○ *Black or Black British*
○ *Caribbean*
○ *African*
○ *Any other black background*
○ *Other ethnic group*
○ *If any other ethnic group (please specify)*

○ *I do not wish to disclose my ethnic origin*

What is your nationality?

Which age bracket are you in?

○ *17 or younger*

○ *18-24*

○ *25-34*

○ *35-44*

○ *45-54*

○ *55-64*

○ *Over 64*

○ *Prefer not to say*

What is your gender?

○ *Male*

○ *Female*

○ *Non-binary*

○ *Other (please specify)*

○ *Prefer not to say*

Do you consider yourself to have a disability?

○ *Yes*

○ *No*

○ *Prefer not to say*

Do you have a job alongside your studies?

○ *Yes – Part-time*

○ *Yes – Full-time*

○ *Yes – Other*

○ *No*

○ *Prefer not to say*

What is the total income of your parents' or guardians' household, or your own household if you are fully independent (if you don't know your exact income, please estimate)?

○ *Less than £9,999*

○ *£10,000–£19,999*

○ *£20,000–£49,999*

○ *£50,000–£99,999*

○ *£100,000–£149,999*

○ *More than £150,000*

○ *Don't know*

○ *Prefer not to say*

Other questions about socioeconomic group, for example parental occupation, may be included here.

Which of the following best describes where you live during term-time?

○ *University halls of residence*

○ *Private PBSA (Purpose-Built Student Accommodation)**

○ *Shared house*

○ *Parent/guardian home*

○ *Prefer not to say*

○ *Other (please specify)*

Please note, definition of PBSA in answer list:
*PBSA (Purpose-Built Student Accommodation) is housing built specifically by private developers for students to live in, usually taking the form of cluster flats (many rooms with shared kitchen and living areas), or private studios, both with attached leisure facilities like cinemas, gyms, and games rooms.

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT LIVING IN YOUR ACCOMMODATION?

For each of the following statements indicate how you feel on a scale of '*strongly agree*' to '*strongly disagree*'. If the statement is not applicable to you, please select *N/A*.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	N/A
My accommodation was as I expected it to be before I arrived.	○	○	○	○	○	○
I feel comfortable expressing who I am.	○	○	○	○	○	○
I expected there to be more people that looked like me.	○	○	○	○	○	○
I feel a sense of belonging.	○	○	○	○	○	○
I find it difficult to fit in.	○	○	○	○	○	○
I can easily access culturally relevant services like hair care, food and make-up close to where I live.	○	○	○	○	○	○
It is important to me that there is a racially diverse student population.	○	○	○	○	○	○
My accommodation feels like a White space.* **White spaces are settings occupied predominantly by White people which are often considered to be informally off limits to those who do not fit in.*	○	○	○	○	○	○
I feel safe and secure.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Students of different ethnicities tend to stick together and not mix.	○	○	○	○	○	○
I have close friendships with students of different ethnicities.	○	○	○	○	○	○
I feel comfortable participating in formal and informal activities within my accommodation.	○	○	○	○	○	○
I would know how to report acts of racism in my accommodation.	○	○	○	○	○	○

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	N/A
I have a good support network that I could rely on if things went wrong.	○	○	○	○	○	○
There are clear and accessible policies promoting equality, diversity and inclusion.	○	○	○	○	○	○
There is a zero-tolerance policy on racism in my accommodation.	○	○	○	○	○	○
I feel comfortable reporting incidents of racial discrimination.	○	○	○	○	○	○
I would know how to report acts of racism in my accommodation.	○	○	○	○	○	○
If I had a comment or complaint, I would know how to report it.	○	○	○	○	○	○
If I reported a concern, I am confident it would be taken seriously and dealt with.	○	○	○	○	○	○
There are positive images of diversity in my halls of residence.	○	○	○	○	○	○
There are references in my halls to historic figures or events, i.e. slavery, that are offensive.	○	○	○	○	○	○
My halls of residence need to be decolonised.* *The process of rethinking links and references to colonialism, imperialism, empire and/or the slave trade.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Is there anything else you would like to tell us about the policies and procedures in your halls of residence?						

TELL US ABOUT YOUR LIVED EXPERIENCES OF RACISM IN YOUR ACCOMMODATION

For each of the following statements indicate how often the following have occurred on a scale of '*Always*' to '*Never*'. If the statement is not applicable to you, please select *N/A*.

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	N/A
Racial diversity is celebrated.	○	○	○	○	○	○
I have been the victim of racism.	○	○	○	○	○	○
I have witnessed acts of racism.	○	○	○	○	○	○
I have heard other students say racist things.	○	○	○	○	○	○
I have witnessed other students positively confront racist attitudes.	○	○	○	○	○	○
I have witnessed staff (i.e. security, residential life team etc.) positively confront racist attitudes.	○	○	○	○	○	○
I have witnessed instances of racism because of COVID-19.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Racism affects my mental health in a negative way.	○	○	○	○	○	○
I have witnessed staff (i.e. security, residential life team etc.) act in a racist way.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your experience of race and racism in your accommodation?						

Interpreting the results

If you have responses from a small percentage of your student base, or have a small student population overall, be aware that minor differences in response between different groups could be due to chance. In this case, the differences should be treated as indicative and can be explored more thoroughly in focus groups.

In some cases, for example the incidence of racism, it can be more important for your policy development to understand the nature of the incidents rather than the frequency – for example where they take place and the impact they have.

University leaders that have very low proportions of Black students have expressed that the limited amount of data can't give them a story. Numbers do not always tell the whole story. For example, if an institution has one recorded racist incident it may be easy to disconnect from the reality of what happened to that one person. 'One' incident might not look too bad on paper, but it can have devastating consequences for the victim of racism. Using qualitative data alongside numbers helps people better understand what racism looks like in an institution.

Focus groups

Open dialogue with Black students is a vital aspect of any research in this area. The following recommendations have been developed by the research team to support effective and safe practice in running focus groups that seek to understand the experiences of Black students.

√ **Invite participants to introduce themselves:** They should be invited to provide their names, pronouns, what year they are in, what they study, what type of accommodation they live in. It is especially important that you make the effort to learn how to say their name properly. The facilitator should mention that names are only required for discussion and note-taking purposes. Names will be redacted, and individuals will be kept anonymous in the report.

√ **Ensure they have completed a consent form:** They need to be fully informed about the research and what it will be used for. Ensure they know they can withdraw at any time.

√ **Establish room etiquette:** Make sure there are ground rules set on how people need to conduct themselves in this space – respecting others, actively listening and giving people space to talk. Be clear on how much time you have, so everyone has an opportunity to speak. If online, ensure they know they can turn their camera off at anytime.

√ **Ensure the facilitators are people who will make Black students feel comfortable and safe:** This could be an independent facilitator, someone who is Black, or a trusted student representative. Ideally you want Black facilitators in this space as the facilitator must have a grasp of cultural nuances that could easily be misinterpreted or played down by someone who is not culturally aware.

√ **Do not record the conversation:** This can make students feel uncomfortable, even if it is deleted after note-taking. Ensure you have note-taking support in the room to capture everything.

√ **Communicate next steps:** Be clear to the participants what the next steps are and when they can expect to hear the results of the research.

Staff feedback

Feedback from accommodation staff can be very effective in helping to identify areas for change, and this includes hearing from housekeeping and security/safety staff. What you ask will depend on your context and may be influenced by findings from the student research. Topics to explore could include:

- Experiences of dealing with incidents involving racism
- Personal confidence in responding to disclosures of racism
- Whether policies and procedures are fit for purpose
- Whether the accommodation is sufficiently inclusive
- Reflections on team diversity and inclusion

Staff may feel more empowered to speak freely if their comments are anonymous. Approaches such as online anonymous surveys or bringing in an external facilitator could be considered. It is helpful to gather ethnicity data as part of any research work with staff as this helps to contextualise the feedback and can flag up any issues around employee EDI.

Acting on the results

✓ **Involve students as partners in shaping the response:** Replay to students what you found in your research and what your potential recommendations are. This way you are allowing them to feed into the process of shaping the recommendations and response if they want to.

✓ **Create an action plan:** Once you have your recommendations, you need to create an action plan which sets out actions, timescales and responsibilites. This will give everyone confidence that this will be taken seriously. Be clear that this is just the beginning of this work and that there will be consistent action in this space. This could be done by establishing a task and finish group to work through the action plan.

✓ **Present the findings and recommendations to all:** Organise a meeting where you can invite everyone that took part in the consultation, university senior leadership, and the wider staff and student body. Allow them all to hear what was found and what the next steps will be.

✓ **Publish your progress online:** Be transparent to all by publishing your findings, recommendations, and action plan online. This way people can hold you accountable, they can be aware of your progress, and they can see you are serious about doing work in this space.

Further support

If you prefer to bring in some additional support for the research, there are a number of specialist research firms who have experience in this space.

Halpin Partnership, who carried out the original Living Black at University research, have experience of helping universities to understand the needs of their Black students in student accommodation. They would welcome an initial conversation about your requirements.

Please contact info@halpinpartnership.com with the email subject line "Living Black at University".

To read the full Living Black at University report
and access other resources, please visit the
**Unite Students Commission on
Living Black at University website**

For further information, please contact
LBUresearch@unitestudents.com